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DECENTRALIZATION AND URBAN SCHOOLS.

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EDUCATIONAL FLAWS ARE MAGNIFIED IN BIG CITY SCHOOL SYSTEMS BECAUSE (1) THE SIZE OF URBAN SYSTEMS CREATES BUREAUCRACIES WHICH CAUSE A PHILOSOPHICAL AND PROCEDURAL RIGIDITY, AND (2) URBAN SYSTEM PUPILS ARE UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO CONFORM TO EDUCATORS' COMPLACENT NOTIONS OF WHAT CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS SHOULD BE. PROGRAMS AIMED AT THE CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED FAIL BECAUSE THEY ARE TACKED ON TO A DYSFUNCTIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. DECENTRALIZATION WITH A CONCOMITANT CLIMATE FOR CHANGE IS NEEDED. ASIDE FROM AN INCREASED RESPONSIVENESS AND EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS, THIS CLIMATE WOULD CHANGE TEACHING CAREER PATTERNS AND REWARD SYSTEMS AND MAKE GREATER USE OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES. DECENTRALIZATION MAY BE A WAY TO TRANSFORM BOTH THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND THE PROCESSES OF EDUCATION WHICH IT DETERMINES. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP," VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1967. (AF)

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The alternatives to the multi-level involvement of decentralization seem to be isolation, irrelevance and alienation.

Decentralization and Urban Schools

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY. CITY schools are often thought of as "a different kind of animal." But the most important characteristic about urban education may well be its similarity to public education in other settings. Curriculum, methods, materials, behavioral norms and the generally fuzzy, genteel and ill-defined goals of urban education are those which are traditional and prevalent throughout the entire country.

As a result of this similarity, I would maintain, we can learn from the massive failure of big city school systems much about what is wrong with schools anyand (almost) everywhere else. That is, the city schools are a glass magnifying the flaws of general educational practice to such a degree that they cannot be glossed over.

I believe there are two fundamental reasons why this is so:

1. The sheer mass of urban systems has created bureaucracies which convert instructional tradition, educational clichés and general pedagogic inertia into a stifling philosophical and procedural rigidity.

2. The pupils of urban systems, particularly low-income pupils (white and Negro), are unable or unwilling to conform to our commonplace and usually complacent notions of what children and/or schools should be. The results cast in bold relief the irrelevance of so much of the school experience to the basic concerns and needs of children and young people.

Thus, while this article will devote itself to a brief discussion of certain educational problems in an urban context, it would perhaps be well to bear in mind what a study of urban education can tell us about schools in general.

Lack of Responsiveness

The most fundamental crisis in urban education today, as I see it, is a failure to produce organizations capable of adapting the program of a given school to the needs of a given child.

Urban bureaucracies have tended generally to codify and enforce systemic values which divert attention from the presumed focus of education—the classroom. Symbolically, children and teach-

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ers rarely appear on the tables of organization. Centrally dictated curriculum and personnel assignments; central office monopoly on status positions; centrally formulated rules and procedures, which gain the force of moral dicta; these are the identifying marks of large school systems.

Uniformity becomes an implicit goal; guidelines become mental corrals; individual cases are handled by general precepts; caution and acquiescence are the keys to survival and promotion; communication is supplanted by directive; interaction is confused with convention and stability is equated with stolidity. And so on. The net effect is that those at the bottom of the bureaucratic pyramid —principals and teachers—become clerks. And children, who bear the total weight of the structure, are not so much educated as processed. Ironically, as one principal put it, "We'd have a great school system if it weren't for the kids."

But there are rumblings around the country that neither students (particularly at the college level) nor parents (particularly in the ghettos) nor teachers (with increasingly militant organizations) are given to tolerating the lack of responsiveness and the general insularity of big city systems. Their combined pressures, perhaps more than any other factors, may force needed changes.

Need for Decentralization

One inevitable conclusion is that the bureaucracies of big city schools must either transform themselves internally or be dismantled by assault from the outside. This means decentralization; decentralization is an attempt to disperse the *emphasis* as well as the functions and powers from the central office to the individual schools and classrooms in order to transform the experience of school for the thousands of youngsters who now reject it.

The details of decentralization will vary from situation to situation, but there are a number of common problems. These include distinguishing between decentralizing certain personnel, operations and powers, and deciding at what level each should be decentralized. Critical to these decisions is whether or not to loosen central control over budget making and control.

One might, for instance, limit central office control of funds merely to granting an allotment based on the number of pupils in each school, thus leaving the allocation of expenditures to the principal of each school. This implies a larger decision: whether to decentralize all of the critical functions and powers of a school system or simply the less essential clerical operations which clutter a central office. The implementation of a decentralization plan obviously must proceed cautiously in order to avoid the negative side effects of individual school autonomy: anarchy, on the one hand, and a proliferation of autocracies on the other—without returning to a stifling central control policy.

But above and beyond, and prior to, each of these delicate and complex matters, there is a more fundamental philosophical question. Is decentralization merely viewed as a way of increasing efficiency by reducing central overload, or is it seen as a way to transform radically both the system and the *process* of education which it determines? Both are undoubtedly necessary, but forced with a choice, I would opt for the latter.

The structural inability of school sys-

tems to achieve meaningful metamorphoses perhaps explains why so many attempts to upgrade urban schools have been frustrated. I refer to the apparent failure to make a dent in the problem of "cultural deprivation" by saturating schools with cultural enrichment programs, reduced pupil-teacher ratios, team teaching arrangements, and the whole array of compensatory education programs which were so dismally reviewed by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission study of *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools.* To oversimplify, I suspect the failures of such approaches result from feeding them into—or tacking them onto—a dysfunctional system which overwhelms, swallows or pollutes them.

The same quagmire, I suspect, lies in wait for various schemes for improving instruction (team teaching, programmed learning, computer-assisted instruction); for integrating schools (educational parks, Princeton plans, massive busing); and for teacher education (microteaching; closed circuit training laboratories; on the job, in-service training) unless there are fundamental changes in the operational values and procedures of educational systems, these innovations will wither on the vine. It is not that these schemes lack inherent merit. Rather, they will only flourish and achieve their potential in a proper context.

The trick, then, is to *remake* and revitalize through decentralization the quantitatively massive and qualitatively sluggish school systems; the ultimate question is what ends would such decentralization serve? These two aspects are inextricably related.

The first step, as I see it, in making a big, urban system more responsive to the needs of individual children, teachers and schools is to create a climate in which beneficial changes can flourish.

A Climate for Change

Such a climate includes an honest respect for the individual needs and concerns of all the participants of the educational process: administrators, teachers, parents and, most of all, children. General directives must be replaced with individual attention. Responsibility and accountability for individual participation in the activities of the school must be placed at the local level. Teachers and children should be given freedom from inhibiting, bureaucratic requirements in order to explore, to experiment and to develop.

While the primary responsibility for setting such a tone lies with the words and deeds of the superintendent of schools, a similar responsibility rests with all of the organizations whose influence affects educational decision making. Teachers' organizations or unions, community groups, and the state department of education must continue to combat the impersonal "objectivity" and procedural rigidity of the school bureaucracy.

A second step in decentralizing the big city schools involves changing the available career patterns and reward systems. In the past, salary, prestige and power have been dependent upon satisfactory (i.e., non-controversial) progress up the bureaucratic ladder. If new arrangements of teachers into teaching and curriculum development teams were to make leadership and the rewards of leadership more accessible at the classroom level, then the creative talent of

teachers would not be channeled into the conformist behavior previously rewarded by promotion to administrative positions. The gambler, the innovator, the boat-rocker must be recognized and rewarded at the classroom level.

A third requirement for a more responsive urban educational system is greater use of the community's resources. By this, I do not mean merely more field trips. City schools should bring the children and the talent and resources of the metropolitan area into greater and more meaningful contact with each other. Social studies, for example, might best be taught and learned in the courts, the legislatures, or even on the streets with community action groups. Humanities courses should involve real artists, musicians and writers, just as vocational courses should involve the community's plumbers, salesmen and industrialists. High school students might well spend part of their day working in the community developing relationships with adults and the world of work. The involvement of the community in planning, operating and evaluating the schools would do much to eliminate the isolation, complacency and irrelevance of urban education.

I cannot discuss community involvement without mentioning the need for more cooperation between public and non-public schools and between urban and suburban school districts. The problems of school construction, technological systems, comprehensive education and racial integration will go unsolved until all of the schools in the city and its suburbs realize their mutual need for each other. Arguments showing the gains in economic efficiency will not alone transcend the provincial smugness of the various school systems. Perhaps a moral appeal to the common values and humane concerns of the metropolitan community will. Equality of educational opportunity certainly cannot be limited by arbitrary political boundaries.

A fourth step in making the schools more responsive involves making people more responsive to each other. Schools can play a significant role in establishing the attitudes and behaviors which determine our relationships with our fellow human beings. If teachers genuinely care about children, and if parents genuinely care about the experiences their children have in the schools, then education cannot help but be more responsive and more meaningful. Children can learn a great deal about warmth and sincerity in human relationships from adults who care. This "step" in decentralization is nothing less than an appeal for a deeper commitment by people to the welfare of their fellow man.

Decentralization provides a mechanism by which persons with deep commitment may become concerned and actively involved. In conclusion, decentralization, in all of the areas outlined above, essentially amounts to making all of the participants in the educational process (teachers, principals, children and administrators) more responsible for what they do and thereby making the whole system more responsive to the needs of the community's children. These then are the "how" and "why" of decentralizing educational systems, urban or otherwise. The alternatives to the multi-level involvement of decentralization seem to be isolation, irrelevance and alienation: no school system has the luxury of choice.